

## Ivan Illich Disputed

TO THE EDITOR: It is impossible to grapple on all the requisite levels with all the implications of the ideas advanced by Ivan Illich in his book *Medical Nemesis—The Expropriation of Health* and discussed in the July issue of the WESTERN JOURNAL (Killeen RNF: A review of Illich's *Medical Nemesis* (Editorial). West J Med 125:67-69, Jul 1976).

Illich's basic thesis, as I understand it, is that the institutions of industrial society rob man of his freedom and that modern medicine not only undermines the individual's freedom by leaving him less competent to care for himself but actually constitutes a direct threat to health itself.

One can only come to such a conclusion, it seems to me, by ignoring a considerable body of countervailing evidence.

For instance, Mr. Illich states that in 1976 in the United States, health care offers the most gripping example of the "expropriation of the individual's ability to cope."

How many, I wonder, of the thousands upon thousands of patients freed from mental institutions by the use of tranquilizers and restored to useful, coping lives would argue with that statement?

Are the thousands spared the ordeal of iron lungs or crippled limbs by polio vaccine less free than they would have been without the intervention of modern medicine?

Are those who have been relieved of pain and restored to full mobility by joint-replacement operations less free?

To suffer unnecessary pain or impairment is not coping; it's stupidity. The purpose of medicine—and medical intervention—is to solve a patient's problem and to restore the individual to a condition where coping is possible.

Of course there can be abuses—individual, institutional, social. Undoubtedly, there are. And in any great era of progress (such as the last 30 years in medicine) imbalance and distortions develop which must be rectified.

Is medicine capable of harm? Unquestionably yes. Is it capable of restricting freedom rather than enhancing freedom? Yes again.

But is medicine in the United States in 1976 doing more harm than good, is it restricting rather than enhancing freedom? I think the answer, based on any fair weighing of the evidence, is a resounding no.

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